

# Teaching intelligence: get to grips with ‘research-led teaching’

Olga Burlyuk explores the different conceptions, challenges and possibilities within the practice

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Everyone in academia has heard about research-led teaching. Many of us are supposedly doing it. But what exactly does it involve?

There is much variation across different higher education systems and institutions. But it is helpful to think of the concept in the broadest manner possible. To help navigate the field, I have identified the six most common ways of understanding research-led teaching: you teach your research; you teach others’ research; you teach students to do research; you do research with your students; you research what you teach; and you research your teaching.

## ‘You teach your research’

This is perhaps the most widespread understanding of research-led teaching. It implies that

you get to teach your own research, be it in a guest lecture, a compact seminar or a full-blown course. No matter the platform, you develop a curriculum based on your own research. As most of us trained as researchers (and often did not formally train to be teachers), enjoy our research and face excessive workloads, this is considered an attractive, indeed desired, route when it comes to teaching.

Given the current academic job market, however, teaching only your own research is risky because your teaching portfolio might become too narrow and eventually render you unemployable. Therefore, scholars, especially junior ones, should embed their research in a broader curriculum and should not shy away from teaching “old but good” general courses, either.

Likewise, while you might consider yourself to be on top of the material in your field, designing a class or a course on it might prove to be a challenging exercise in stock-taking, broadening outlook, engaging with alternative opinions on the subject – and simply keeping up to date.

### **‘You teach others’ research’**

This is another common understanding of research-led teaching. Put simply, it means that the substance of your teaching is driven by work that other researchers have done in the field. In practice, this implies using your lectures and course readings to expose students to original academic research, rather than textbooks and handbooks.

The bones of contention in this strand of research-led teaching concern what research deserves to be taught and at what educational level. All would agree that the research we teach should be noteworthy. Yet opinions vary as to what the key selection criterion should be: most fundamental? illustrative? mainstream, deviant, recent, diverse (theoretically, methodologically, ideologically)? – or something else altogether? Although the tutor should make the final call, institutional and disciplinary constraints will play a role.

Furthermore, while most in higher education seem to agree that teaching led by research of some kind is important, opinions differ as to whether this teaching approach is suitable only for postgraduate students, who are likely to be more mature and specialised in their field of study. I have used research-led teaching with postgraduate and undergraduate students and found that it works with both.

### **‘You teach students to do research’**

In essence, this strand involves integrating research assignments to train students in one (or a combination) of the following: the process of enquiry (curiosity, creativity, critical thinking), the content of a subject (specialisation, profiling) and research and writing methods (commonly sold as “transferable skills”).

Beyond your usual course paper or thesis, this might take the form of assembling a portfolio of some kind, individual or group student presentations, and various in-class research assignments. The challenges here are striking a balance between autonomy and guidance, assessing students’ work and curbing the burden of evaluating plentiful student submissions. Each option comes with its own set of pedagogical wins and losses. But practice does make perfect in this respect.

### **‘You do research with your students’**

This hardly requires explanation: you team up with students in doing research. Of course, undertaking such research-led teaching depends not only on the strength and commitment of students and the nature of your research, but also on the formal rules of your institution. In some cases, you might be unable to *formally* account for such collaboration as teaching, which could pose problems for both sides.

### **‘You research what you teach’**

This approach, which might be better called “teaching-led research”, refers to arguably infrequent and counter-intuitive occasions when teaching a subject inspires you to explore new research avenues. Well, why not?

### **‘You research your teaching’**

The last strand could be known as “teaching as research”, and it denotes cases when teaching *is* your research. This type of research-led teaching need not be limited to scholars working in pedagogy studies: others can carry out research into the teaching of their particular subject or discipline, or reflect on an innovative method.

Whichever type of research-led teaching you might wish to practise, be aware of the professional evaluation matrices in your academic system, or the system you might wish to land in, because they could shift your priorities. And, of course, bureaucratic “dos and don’ts” may set the parameters of the possible. But if we think of research-led teaching in its broadest sense, perhaps it can open up new possibilities for us as teachers, and for our students.

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